The Whispering Gallery

In Which Gertrude Atherton Acquaints Us With the Alpine School of Fiction, and in Which We Climb Up and Look Around a Bit Ourself.

By DONALD ADAMS.

GERTRUDE ATHERTON has just put forth one of the most entertaining literary theories we have encountered for some time. It concerns her diagnosis of what is the matter with fiction writing in the United States to-day.

When we came upon her article in *The Bookman* we were greatly puzzled by its title, "The Alpine School of Fiction." We couldn't figure that out at all, and so we had to read the article. We found that Mrs. Atherton wasn't thinking of mountain climbing or of the poem "Excelsior," or of a new short story course, but was using the word literally to designate a racial stock which bears that name in the text books of anthropology.

Upon this racial stock she places the blame for what she believes is the failure of our young novelists to faithfully depict the American scene. The Alpine strain, which to-day largely peoples France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czecho-Slovakia, Poland and Russia, and has contributed much material to the American melting pot, is greatly inferior in quality, Mrs. Atherton thinks, to the Nordic strain that founded the republic. So, she says, are the Mediterranean peoples who form another large element in our later immigration.

The superior Nordic strain of the British, Scandinavian and Huguenot elements of our population is being submerged by the baser racial groups. The Nordics, anthropologically speaking, are dolichocephalic (long skulled) people; the Alpines and Mediterraneans are brachycephalic (broad skulled). The Nordics are physically superior, the best adapted to war and government, the strongest in initiative and achivement, and our literature is suffering, Mrs. Atherton insists, because we are not paying more attention to the part they have in our composition.

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Main Street, &c.

THE trouble with "Brass" and "Main Street," and "Zell" and "Three Soldiers," to which she refers directly, is that they are concerned with the inferior element of our population, that they ignore the best there is in America. She finds no worthy characters in the books of the middle Western novelists who seem to think they have discovered the United States as a field for fiction. The leading figures in "Three Soldiers" were "plain American scum." If these men had been typical of the A. E. F. we would now be under German domination.

These novelists are continually showing us persons, Mrs. Atherton argues, who are ineffectual in life. They are "the feeble puppets of circumstance, miserable victims." The Nordics have initiative, have the marrow and the bone to meet life on its own terms, and we cannot ignore them in making a true picture of American life. "If it were not for Booth Tarkington," she says, "one would be forced to the conclusion that there was not an American of old stock left in the Middle West."

She finds it praiseworthy that these writers have fled from sentimentality, but unfortunate that "in the breathless hunt for the obverse of lollypops they have discovered only tadpoles." With the exception of John Dos Passos she does not accuse the younger novelists of being brachycephalics themselves — only occupying themselves with broad instead of long skulls, and of yielding to the pressure of a broad skulled environment.

Her remedy for all this is less psycho-analysis and more anthropology. "The reason," she explains, 'that so many novelists, brilliant in style, profound and searching in analysis, and sufficiently diverting in action, leave the intelligent reader unsatisfied, is because the writer has trusted to his intuition and observation, and is wholly ignorant of the science that would have steered him with fewer stumbles through that maze we call human nature. Human nature is largely a matter of the cephalic index."

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Mrs. Atherton's Remedy.

OUR own feeling is that under this heap of skulls, broad and long, Mrs. Atherton has an idea with which we are in hearty agreement. We are not much of an anthropologist ourself, and experience great difficulty in keeping the Cro-Magnon, Neanderthal and Pleistocene men in their proper sequence, even after having read Wells's History. We know that Mrs. Atherton has made a hobby, perhaps we should say a serious study, of anthropology.

Nevertheless, we find it difficult to believe that human nature is largely a matter of the cephalic index. And we find it equally difficult to find in the anthropology textbooks a handy guide to novel writing. There have been some pretty good novelists who struggled along rather ignorant, we are afraid, of the terms brachycephalic and dolichocephalic. We doubt if Thackeray knew them, or when he sits down to write a novel, if they enter often into the consciousness even of H. G. Wells.

We are by no means convinced that a man may not be a dolichocephalic, and yet be a fairly decent sort, even as a character in a novel. And that in spite of the fact that we are dolichocephalic ourself.

But we do not wish to obscure Mrs. Atherton's indictment of the new realists by attempting to confound her on an anthropological basis. It is much more pleasant for us to conceive of the Nordics as a superior race. It gives us something to fall back upon and be cocky about when all the other props are knocked out from under us.

Besides, we are with her absolutely when she deplores the sort of human material which is being used so lavishly by the middle western realists. These characters may be broad skulled or not, but they are certainly poor stuff. We are out of all patience with their feverish self-questioning, and their habitual surrender to the environment in which they are cast, after much mouthing against it. But we do not believe Mrs. Atherton has cause for so great alarm. The deficiencies she finds will be supplied, and the same men will supply them. People find it amusing to look into distorting mirrors at Coney Island, but they do not have them in their homes.

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Poetry Below Par?

ALSO in *The Bookman* we found its London correspondent, "Simon Pure," holding forth pessimistically, on the contemporary decline of poetry in England. The war, in his opinion, gave a rather artificial stimulus to poetry. Rupert Brooke's death supplied a special impetus to the movement. Then the soldier poets came home. They had not died, like Brooke, and the war as a continued basis for material failed them.

Since then, they have not been successful in finding material. John Drinkwater revived the historical drama and led others to attempt it, a movement which met with small encouragement. Masefield wrote "Reynard the Fox," and *The Bookman's* correspondent looks to see the younger English poets following him up with other pictures of English sport. Siegfried Sassoon is counseling a slower rate of composition.

Because a successful volume of poetry in England sells at best 5,000 copies, most of the young English poets are taking to journalism, which "Simon Pure" regards as fatal, because it takes too much out of them. He does not mention the possible gate receipts from a lecture tour in America, or the more extended sale that is possible when American editions are printed.

It does not seem surprising to us that the young poets of England should find it hard to write. They had four years of the war, some of them, and the process of readjustment was long. Those of them that have a true gift will find themselves again, and if it is strong enough, it will survive even journalism. And if it isn't stronge enough, it is better that it should perish. A pretty good novel may serve an idle hour, but a pretty good poem isn't worth the postage stamp that carries it to a magazine.

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A Book to Own.

IT is fully fifteen years since we read "The Three Musketeers," and we have not looked into it since. When we saw Douglas Fairbanks's picture, we wanted to read it again, and when we saw the other day a copy of the Leloir edition which Appleton has just brought out, we were set in our determination. Whoever loves the story will want to have this edition with the more than 200 spirited drawings by the late Maurice Leloir. They have all the verve of the narrative itself.

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John Drinkwater.

AFTER all, this new collection by John Drinkwater, "Seeds of Time," gives some encouragement. To us it holds more positive beauty than we have observed in his work before. There is no practice we abhor more thoroughly than quoting to point a moral, poems that are fine things in themselves, but we are going to risk it with this piece of Drinkwater's, which we would like to see placed over the desk of every creative writer who stops short of giving the best there is in him:

This be my pilgrimage and goal,
Daily to march and find
The secret phrases of the soul,
The evangels of the mind.

While easy tongues are lightly heard,
Let me with them be great
Who still upon the perfect word
As heavenly fowlers wait.

In taverns none will I be seen
But can my daemon teach
My cloudy thought to wash all clean
In the bright sun of speech.

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Newspaper Stories.

IN company with W. A. Davenport we have undertaken to gather for publication a collection of newspaper stories—not stories about newspaper work, but an anthology intended to preserve and make accessible some of the fine work which has appeared in the American press.

The book is not to contain editorials or special articles. It is to consist of news stories. We are convinced that the American reporter in the course of his daily work has turned out some things which do not deserve the oblivion of yesterday's newspaper and we are making this announcement because we are eager to have the cooperation of others who may have sometimes observed a story which stood out from the mass of the day's news. The field to be covered is so vast that thorough personal research is impossible. We must rely largely on stories we recall ourselves or that others remember.